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Review Article

Pain Management in Albania's Health Care System

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Access to pain management is a fundamental human right. Addressing pain - whether mental, emotional, psychological, or physical - should be a primary goal for medical professionals. This article provides an overview of how the Albanian Healthcare System is structured to assist patients and examines the focus of scientific research in this area.

Material and Methods: Literature review of scientific articles found on PubMed, Google Scholar, Cochrane, and Elsevier. Observation of Health Care System in Albania for 3 years. Observation of Education System in Albania for more than 15 years.

Results: After literature review it became quite clear the panorama of Pain Management in Albania which totally lacks research focused on the way pain is being evaluated and monitored by nursing staff, and on non-pharmacological methods for pain relief. Regarding pain evaluation, it is traditionally evaluated through subjective and objective evaluation and there is not a unified, standardized protocol with defined tools and a schedule on how and when to evaluate pain and to address it. Until now studies and articles are focused on identifying barriers to Palliative Care, measuring Health Care System quality, and patient satisfaction. Meanwhile, Postoperative Pain Management is quite a new topic.

Conclusion: In Albania's Health Care System standardized protocols for pain assessment and management are lacking, and there is a need for continued scientific research and development in this field to address the challenges identified and offer solutions based on developed countries' consolidated experience in pain therapy.

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INTRODUCTION

Access to pain management is a human right. Everyone deserves a life without pain but life itself, as we know it on this planet, can't be pain-free. Scientists of all fields lead research in addressing solutions to every kind of pain, mental, emotional, psychological, and for sure physical. We can't assure a life without any kind of pain but we certainly can do much to reduce physical pain. Relieving our patients' pain should be one of the daily goals of medical staff and achieving it goes much further than the daily work habits of doctors and nurses, examination, diagnosing, pharmacological or surgical treatment, that we continue to have in our clinical practice.

This article aims to give a general overview of how the Albanian Healthcare System is organized to assist patients at all levels of service and how the scientific research in health field is focused in this specific topic.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Literature review of scientific articles found on PubMed, Google Scholar, Cochrane, and Elsevier. Observation of Health Care System in Albania for 3 years. Observation of Education System in Albania for more than 15 years.

RESULTS

Through the current literature review is quite clear the panorama of Pain Management in Albania which totally lacks research focused on the way pain is being evaluated and monitored by nursing staff, and on non-pharmacological methods for pain relief. Regarding pain evaluation, it is traditionally evaluated through subjective and objective evaluation and there is not a unified, standardized protocol with defined tools and a schedule on how and when to evaluate pain and to address it. Meanwhile, in order to successfully treat a symptom, first one should be aware of its presence and intensity.

Scientific Research in the field of Pain Management has just taken the first step and there is a lot to be done in Albania. The above-mentioned studies and articles are focused on identifying barriers to Palliative Care, measuring Health Care System quality, and patient satisfaction. Meanwhile, Postoperative Pain Management is quite a new topic and as a result, we have no data about barriers to Postoperative Pain Management, application of non-pharmacological methods for pain relief, and clinical trials on pain management.

DISCUSSION

How is Pain Management Covered in Albania's Health Care System?

Pain Management in the Public Health Care System

The Public Health Care System offering diagnostics and treatment in Albania is organized into three levels. Primary Health Care consists of Health Centers where service is covered by family doctors. The Second Level of Health Care consists of hospital services covered by hospitals and regional hospitals. The Third Level of Health Care, the higher level [1], consists of the "Mother Teresa" University Hospital Center in Tirana. In all these institutions pain is managed mostly pharmacologically, by the medical staff and monitored by the nursing staff. In Primary Health Care, physicians treat pain based on the regulations and competencies defined by law and their employment contracts.

The cases they can't or aren't allowed to treat are referred to the Second level of Health Care, and later if needed the patient will be referred to the Third level of Health Care. There are many restrictions regarding the analgesic drugs' refund, especially for acute diseases, as a result, patients have to buy the analgesics themselves. In the Second and Third Levels of Health Care System, Pain Therapy is covered by anesthetists during surgery and by the surgeons in the Surgery Unit, by the obstetrics in the OB-GYN Units, by the emergency doctor, and traumatologists in the Emergency and Trauma Units.

Regarding non-pharmacological methods for pain relief, these are generally considered not worthy inside the hospital but rather useful for minor pain which is relieved at home. Pain in hospitalized patients is treated pharmacologically. Non-pharmacological methods are generally ignored. Health care staff and patients are scheptic about them, and this is a stagnant mentality that is being inherited from generation to generation of nurses and doctors. Meanwhile, worldwide there is a growing attention and research on these methods which are cheap, easy to be implemented, safe, and with no side effects.

Physiotherapy service is not included in the Primary Health Care. In the Second Level of Health Care, physiotherapy service is included as an adjuvant to the pharmacological treatment of rheumatological diseases and trauma but is not available in the majority of public regional hospitals. This service is included in the Third level of Health Care. There aren't Pain Clinics that would help patients manage pain, in addition to medications, with physical, behavioral, and psychological therapies, neither alternative medicine. There aren't Hubs or Spoke clinics for chronic pain patients, nor POP clinics for postoperative patients.

Regarding the psychological assistance of patients suffering from pain in Health Care institutions, this is still a distant reality. Based on the last official report of The Order of the Psychologist in the Republic of Albania, there are in total 147 licensed clinical psychologists [2], but their recruitment process in the Primary Health Care institutions is a recent event that was developed during June-July 2023 [3]. Meanwhile, based on the last official data for the Second Level of the Health Care system, there are only 16 psychologists in the Mental Health institutions [4], and there are no data about the other units. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a mediatic reaction from the medical staff of the hospitals highlighted the need for clinical psychologists in the hospital service, for the identification and management of the mental health consequences. This service is already offered in some of the private hospitals in the capital.

Pain Management in the Private Health Care Market

The Private Health Care Market is mostly developed in the capital, and it consists of private hospitals and laboratories. This market is pretty competitive to the Public Health Care institutions regarding infrastructure, imagery, laboratories, and human resources. Unfortunately, regarding Pain Therapy, there is no significant difference compared to the public institutions.

Almost in every big city of Albania, there are private clinics that mostly offer laboratory services and scheduled visits with well-known specialists of several medical fields but nothing new about Pain Management. In regards to physiotherapy service, the private market is not successful because of being an expensive service not affordable for the majority of the population. It is mainly accessible by the wealthy stratum of the population, mostly in the capital and some of the most populated cities.

Albanian Mentality about Pain

It's inherited from the old days the mentality of being brave and bear the pain because it is a shame to be seen suffering and crying, and this mentality is still strong, especially for men. Among elderly people, it is perceived as normal to live in pain while getting older because in the traditional mentality, life is like that, as you get older you also get pain that you have to bear sometimes even through gritting your teeth. What is even more disturbing is the behavior of medical staff which seems to applaud and congratulate the "strongest" patient and gets annoyed by the patient who complains. The majority of doctors are oriented towards the pharmacological therapy and this has impacted nursing staff practice, and also patients' beliefs. Pain therapy is a whole perspective, generally unknown, to the Albanian Health Care staff.

Gjirokastra Region is facing population ageing, and has been dealing with the emigration of youth for more than a decade. People who suffer from chronic diagnoses that cause pain are generally elderly, and most of them have limited financial resources. Nevertheless, they are willing to spend on analgesic drugs, preferably injections, rather than spending the same amount of money on alternative treatments, physiotherapy or psychological support. Let's not forget that community stigmatizes the psychological support.

Generally, patients are not informed by medical staff about the multiple benefits and lack of side effects of alternative pain relief methods. There have been private initiatives on physiotherapy services, which have bankrupt because of the above-mentioned mentality, and the cost of their services which are expensive compared to the standard of living, moreover their services are not included in the health insurance. In the Gjirokastra region, there isn't any clinic that offers specialized and professional psychological support for patients facing pain. The situation is quite similar in other regions of Albania, except the capital.

Public funds covering analgesia in public hospitals of Albania

The issue of the Health Care system budget is always a point of discussion, as it happens in most countries around the world. The total budget covering the public Health Care system has marked a slight constant increase over the years. For 2024, it consists of the 9.24% of the state budget, but is mainly focused on the overall transformation of the system, pay rise for medical and nursing staff, health service coverage, and infrastructure improvement. There are no free to public data about budget covering analgesic diversity and quality for hospital drugs, and patients used to complain about lack of drugs in the hospitals, and lots of limitations for drug refund in the Primary Health Care.

Analgesia is not a topic of priority in Albanian health policies, and investments keep being focused in the overall improvement of the Health Care System regarding mainly infrastructure, human resources, and health service coverage.

Legal Framework of this Issue in Albania

In Albania, there isn't yet an approved law to regulate Pain Therapy in the Health Care System.

Medical or Nursing Curricula in Albania

Current Medical and Nursing Curricula are poor in Pain Therapy content, in the best of cases, in several public universities, they include Palliative Care topics.

Albanian Health Professionists' Education about Pain Therapy

Thanks to researchers, Pain Therapy has started to be part of continuous education topics for medical staff through the National Center of Continuous Education [5] (QKEV) but surely this process should be continuous, inclusive, and of diversified content in the Pain Management field. The actual medical staff lacks professional skills in pain management that come from old Nursing Curricula, lack of continuous comprehensive education, missing regulatory legal acts and clinical guidelines.

Palliative Care in Albania

Development of Palliative Care in Albania is restricted because of several factors. The greatest obstacle is lack of human resources qualified in this field. Another obstacle is a cultural taboo. In our culture is not preferred to tell all the truth to the patients about their diagnosis and expected prognosis. Until the 1990s it was even illegal to inform patients that they were having a cancerous disease. Morphine usage is restricted by law and very difficult to access and finally there's a common phobia that morphine is very dangerous. According to the last evaluation of the needs for palliative care in Albania, 66.3% of cancer patients didn't receive at all palliative care. Figures are very low for palliative care on non-cancer patients [6].

Currently, Palliative Care is offered in a few public hospitals, in Primary Health Care through Oncologic Service at Home which is available only in the capital and lacks human resources and funds, and mainly from non-governmental actors like Sue Ryder Association, Palliative Care Service Albania, Mary Potter Team Hospice, and Caritas Albania Humanitarian Organization which mainly offer at-home service for terminal patients. Yet, the majority of terminal patients don't have access to proper palliative care. Considering the starting point, palliative care in Albania has had significant developments in recent years, thanks to a close partnership between the Ministry of Health, nonprofit organizations, and the Open Society Foundation Albania, with concrete results in legal framework and clinical practice.

In Albania is currently in progress the National Programme of Cancer Control 2022-2030 [7] that aims to regulate and develop all the actors, methods, activities, and training with the final objective of increasing early diagnostication of cancer, increasing life expectancy after cancer, improve quality of life through contemporary treatment and palliative care.

Scientific Research about Pain Management in Albania

Scientific research about Palliative Care

Scientific research on Pain Management is focused on Palliative Care and the following studies have identified several barriers among medical and nursing staff. Among general practitioners working in Primary Health Care the biggest barrier results to be the fear that cancer patients will become addicted to opioids. This barrier was significantly reduced following a one-day training on opioid-based pain management [8]. Nurses also have incomplete or incorrect knowledge of pain assessment and opioid use [9]. A study that assessed the knowledge of healthcare staff of the hospital of Vlorë regarding Palliative Care concluded that our Health Care System lacks the proper structures for terminal patients, and hospital staff needs training on palliative care [10].

Evaluations of the prevalence of pain and need for pain management, the pain workforce and its organization have analyzed the situation and identified its challenges [11,12]. A study about Barriers to the Development of Palliative Care in the Countries of Central and Eastern Europe identified four significant barriers, financial resources; opioid availability; lack of public awareness and government recognition of palliative care as a field of specialization; and lack of palliative care education and training programs. In Albania were identified as predominant false beliefs about opioids and lack of opioid availability [13,14]. A study that investigated the services offered to terminal patients in Albania, proved that these patients lack the psychological approach to cancer pain management because of their mentality and also because of lack of psychological service in Health Care System [15]. A PhD thesis proves the insufficiency of Primary Health Care on palliative care towards cancer patients [16].

Scientific Research about Patient Satisfaction

In the last decade, several studies have been done in public and private hospitals in Albania aiming to measure healthcare service quality and patient satisfaction based on SERVPERF dimensions of SERVQUAL which are Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy. These studies have different conclusions about the correlation between medical staff empathy and patient satisfaction. This correlation turns out to be affected by the patient's sociodemographic factors, and the kind of hospital, public or private [17,23]. There is no evidence on patient satisfaction regarding pain management or any non-pharmacological method for pain relief.

Scientific Research about Postoperative Pain Management

A study developed at Tirana University Hospital Center "Nënë Tereza" highlighted the need for a postoperative pain management guideline [24]. An article on the trauma care perspective highlights the lack of training of medical staff in trauma management [25. There are studies that compare pharmacological ways of treating pain after surgery [26,27].

CONCLUSION

In Albania's Health Care System standardized protocols for pain assessment and management are lacking, and there is a need for continued scientific research and development in this field to address the challenges identified and offer solutions based on developed countries' consolidated experience in pain therapy.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare there is no conflict of interest.

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